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SUBJECT: PRT LASHKAR GAH: SEMI-ANNUAL HELMAND REVIEW

Classified By: DCM Richard Norland for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Helmand faces serious problems within all PRT pillars)- security, governance and development. Security is the most pressing and immediate concern for the province. Apart from intense civilian and military focus on major projects such as Kajaki, little progress can be expected on governance and development (and counter narcotics) until the security situation improves. Security is worst in northern and southern Helmand, where ISAF and the Afghan Government (GOA) currently are prosecuting operations. While the central region is relatively safer, there are risks of intimidation and violence to those with links to the GOA or ISAF, and there is evidence of increased risk to NGO staff and contractors involved in reconstruction projects. In terms of governance, Helmand is saddled with a corrupt and mismanaged bureaucracy that has little ability to provide services to the populace and few qualified people to tap as replacements. Elected Provincial Council members have little influence and few links to their constituents. The new Governor, whose interest in reaching out to tribal leaders has flagged as he focuses more on the need for military operations, has a domineering style that eventually might bring tribal elders into the GOA's sphere, but also could result in little attention paid to improving provincial and district governance.

12. (C) Economically, a province rich in resources has seen decades of conflict and neglect seriously degrade its irrigation system and infrastructure. The deteriorated security environment has hampered reconstruction and chased away many NGOs. Though Helmand appears poised to see progress in reconstruction and development, given donor plans and projects, the security environment and the lack of human capital could limit anticipated gains. In the social sphere, women face resistance to any change in traditional roles, e.g., opportunities to learn new job skills. Those perceived as challenging those traditional roles face threats. The education sector has been hit hard, with school closures and

burnings, and attacks on teachers. Finally, combating the opium trade and reducing and eventually eliminating poppy cultivation, cuts across - and directly impacts - security, governance and development efforts. Helmand's population seems ambivalent about the exploding poppy trade. More might turn against the poppy culture if they appreciated the growing indigenous addiction problem, if they saw greater risk introduced at the cultivation, production and trafficking points in the trade, and if they perceived themselves to have viable alternative sources of livelihood. Intensifying progress on these key pillars of our CN strategy remains essential. END SUMMARY

Security

13. (C) Local Afghans are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with conditions in Helmand, with many pointing to the deteriorating security environment as the primary reason. The deterioration accelerated in 2006. Over the summer, fighting in the north and south of the province intensified greatly. Autumn saw a lull in the fighting, a decrease that coincided with the Afghan government's controversial agreement (supported by UK-led ISAF) with the shura of the northern district of Musa Qala that turned over to local elders responsibility for the district's security. Fighting increased at the onset of winter, with the fraying and breakdown of multiple ceasefires in Naw Zad and the one in Sangin, and with the UK-led Helmand Task Force prosecuting operations in Kajaki, Nahri Sarraj and Garmser districts. Early in 2007 the uneasy quiet in Musa Qala ended with the Taliban attacking and occupying the district center. In March, ISAF and the GOA launched Operation Achilles to

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stabilize the northern districts.

14. (C) Until recently, the central districts had not experienced the fighting seen elsewhere, until the Government of Afghanistan (GOA) launched an operation in the area of Babaji, north and west of the provincial center of Lashkar Gah, on March 22 which displaced anti-government forces from the area. This operation aside, in the generally more secure center individuals with links to the GOA have been at risk of intimidation or violence. Examples include two Afghan National Police (ANP) personnel beheaded in January 2007; a line ministry employee reportedly forced under threat to move his family from Nawa-I-Barakzayi district; and staff members of the Ministry of Women's Affairs receiving threatening phone calls and "night letters". In 2006, all but one of the suicide bombing attacks in Lashkar Gah appeared directed at GOA or PRT/ISAF targets. Dozens of Afghan civilians died in the incidents, including a group waiting outside the Governor's compound, seeking permission to attend the Hajj. There have been three suicide bombings in Lashkar Gah this year.

15. (C) Civilian members of the PRT move primarily within Lashkar Gah and to a lesser extent neighboring Nad Ali. Afghans can generally move freely in the central districts, though (ironically) perhaps one of the greatest problems encountered is harassment at police checkpoints. The ANP is almost universally seen as a deeply corrupt organization that preys upon rather than supports the populace. The Afghan National Army (ANA) enjoys a better reputation, and in some districts it is improving. The PRT has funded the construction of police checkpoints, manned by ANP and the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP). (NOTE: In the north, ANAP have been deployed to man checkpoints. There have been reports of Taliban checkpoints in the north, where "tolls" are assessed. END NOTE.)

16. (C) The end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007 saw an increase in threats to NGOs and contractors undertaking reconstruction projects. Examples include an NGO that reported the kidnapping (and eventual release) of two local

staff, supposedly by the Taliban; a contractor in Nad Ali who was threatened into abandoning work on a school, and another in Nahri Sarraj who was beheaded; the kidnapping and execution of a doctor who worked at a medical clinic operated by an NGO for the GOA; and the first suicide bombing of 2007, which was directed at the compound of the USAID Alternative Livelihoods implementer.

Political

¶7. (C) Helmand's ineffectual and corrupt bureaucracy) at the provincial and district levels - has long been a source of dissatisfaction and has offered few prospects for improvement. Line ministries have small staffs and, aside from Rural Rehabilitation and Development, little in the way of funds for development. The Provincial Council (PC) is not yet ready to play a constructive role. The PC members appear to have settled in Lashkar Gah and are reluctant to reach out to their districts, citing lack of budget and security concerns.

¶8. (C) Upon arriving in Helmand in January 2007, Governor Assadullah Wafa energetically reached out to tribal leaders, trying to bring them into the GOA's sphere by issuing an ultimatum that, for tribal councils to enjoy his recognition and cooperation, they must accept a slate of conditions requiring cooperation with the GOA, ISAF, and development organizations. Two district shuras signed Wafa's demanding "protocols", though afterwards both were briefly occupied by the Taliban. Over time, Wafa has pursued his protocols less aggressively; increasingly, he has pointed to robust military operations across the province as a prerequisite to political outreach, and he has backed away from efforts to eradicate

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poppy.

¶9. (C) Wafa's domineering style) some would call it abrasive and dismissive) is another source of concern. His imperious approach leaves little room for improving local governance. He has made clear his disdain for the line ministries, declaring them to be ineffective and corrupt. He has demanded close oversight over all development projects in Helmand and only reluctantly agreed to call a PDC meeting. Wafa also risks falling into the trap he often rails about: promising but not delivering, e.g., touting the establishment of a university in Helmand and promising that poppy eradication would cover the province.

¶10. (C) Local distrust of the GOA flows largely from the extravagant misrule and rampant corruption over much of the past several years, which have so ingrained the perception of an unresponsive, ineffective and unrepresentative government that few now look to the GOA for assistance. For example, where courts are functioning (reportedly only in the four central districts), there is little evidence that locals use them. People are more likely to turn to traditional mechanisms of justice, like local shuras, or to run afoul of Taliban justice in ad hoc "courts".

Economy, Reconstruction and Development

¶11. (SBU) Helmand has considerable potential for livestock, fisheries, poultry, floriculture, and horticulture, and is rich in natural resources, primarily the Helmand and Arghandab rivers. Decades ago, construction of an irrigation system created an extensive farming zone, but ensuing conflict and neglect nearly destroyed the irrigation and road infrastructure. As a result, Helmand's economy remains feudalistic and underdeveloped. The majority of the province has no access to electricity. There is no manufacturing industry of any significance, with the exception of a small marble factory and dilapidated cotton gin. Vocational training schools are in complete disrepair. Poppy

cultivation has overshadowed all licit agricultural activities. Without dramatic changes, sustainable growth remains a distant prospect, due to the insecure environment, the lack of infrastructure, agriculture production techniques and crop values.

¶12. (SBU) Reconstruction and development have been inhibited in Helmand, in large part due to the deteriorated security environment that has caused many NGOs to leave the province. This has limited development, income and employment opportunities. USAID plans and projects (Kajaki energy and infrastructure project, Alternative Livelihoods, ARIES micro-finance), the UK (short-term quick impact and longer-term agriculture projects), as well as Danish and Estonian projects targeting the education and health sectors give some basis for optimism. Helmand might experience only very limited gains this year, not simply due to the insecure environment, but also because of the lack of local capacity, in government and the private sectors, that hampers delivery of services and reconstruction.

Cultural/Social

¶13. (SBU) There are few opportunities for women in this very traditional province. Thus, while a project to train midwives has local support, there is resistance to employment outside the home, training, or even elementary education for girls. Some local elders have expressed displeasure at the prospect of a widows' association running a dairy, especially, as they said, in a province with significant male unemployment. Those seen to advocate a greater role for women in Afghan society, e.g., staff of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, have received threatening calls and "night letters". Nevertheless, there are a number of women's associations active in the province, whose members point to

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the great need for employment in the villages and have expressed interest in a variety of training opportunities.

¶14. (SBU) Widespread insecurity has hit the education sector particularly hard. The number of people reporting their children not attending school increased as the security situation worsened, and has remained steady. Of the 224 schools in the province, 113 are operating, 45 are "semi-active" (ceasing operations during periods of conflict), 30 are closed, and 36 have been burned. Schools in the provincial center are generally open and operating, though a fear of suicide bombings has kept some parents from sending their children to classes and some teachers have reported receiving night letters. The director for the Education Ministry reported that three teachers were murdered in 2006, and one was murdered in January, 2007. (Note: According to Education Ministry contacts in Kabul, eight staff including teachers were killed in 2006.)

Counter Narcotics

¶15. (C) Security and corruption are closely intertwined with the drug trade, so closely that it is often difficult to separate trafficking, politics and the ongoing insurgency. As Afghanistan's top producer of opium - representing nearly half of its poppy cultivation) Helmand has seen poppy become the key economic factor. Despite its centrality in the province's economy, only a limited number of influential people (including some government officials) drive poppy cultivation and derive the greatest profits from it; for most, there are relatively small though still tangible benefits.

¶16. (C) Introducing risk into the poppy trade is the goal and greatest challenge here. The local population is well aware of the evils of the opium trade, which have been the subject of numerous shuras and radios messages. Yet people seem evenly divided as to whether poppy cultivation is good for the province or not. Locals may not appreciate the

growing addiction problem in Helmand, where the head of a local drug rehabilitation clinic estimates that one in five families contains a drug addict (likely an overstatement, but the problem for Helmand is considerable and growing). Some of those who accept the fact of counter narcotics efforts in Helmand insist that they be "fair", by which they appear to mean the risks should fall more on drug lords rather than small farmers and should not target areas where the people (at least nominally) accept the GOA's rule. More Helmand residents might turn against the poppy culture if they appreciated the growing indigenous addiction problem, if they saw greater risk introduced at the cultivation, production and trafficking points in the trade, and if they perceived themselves to have viable alternative sources of livelihood. Intensifying progress on these key pillars of our CN strategy is essential.

¶17. (SBU) Reducing and eventually eliminating poppy cultivation is not the only pressing need in Helmand. There is a critical need to strengthen GOA institutions related to counter-narcotics)- Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan, the Ministry of Counter Narcotics and, more broadly, the courts and the jails)- which are largely not functioning.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) While the opium trade is generally identified as Helmand's paramount problem, for most residents the deteriorated security environment represents the most immediate and pressing concern. One need not embrace the Governor's often repeated statement that all but three districts are "controlled" by the Taliban to appreciate the problem -- a population that has never had strong ties to the central government has seen that government's influence

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undermined over the last year. Even should Governor Wafa pursue and secure additional signatures on his protocols, that would be no more than paper recognition of GOA authority unless the government can credibly and sustainably project itself beyond the central districts. This will not be possible without a stronger ISAF role. Any assessment of progress on governance, development and counter narcotics in Helmand must be seen and measured in light of the current security environment.

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